

1 Sam 31-2 Sam 1
May 14, 2023

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: We are going to read in today's text that David weeps over Saul's death, even though Saul tried to kill him numerous times! How is it possible to love our enemies like David did? [Let people engage]

Transition: We have looked at the life of Samuel in the opening chapters (1-8), the rise and fall of Saul in the middle chapters (9-15), and then finally David and Saul together in these closing chapters (16-31). And in these closing chapters we have really been tracing the rise of David and the fall of Saul with respect to the kingship in Israel. Saul disobeyed God, and as a result God took the kingdom away from Saul and gave it to David. Today, as we come to the final chapter in 1 Samuel, we also come to the final chapter in Saul's life and read David's lament in 2 Sam 1. Let's begin.

BOOK:

Saul Takes His Life

31 Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell slain on Mount Gilboa. ²The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. ³The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.

⁴Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me."

But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. ⁵When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. ⁶So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day.

⁷When the Israelites along the valley and those across the Jordan saw that the Israelite army had fled and that Saul and his sons had died, they abandoned their towns and fled. And the Philistines came and occupied them.

⁸The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹They cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people. ¹⁰They put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

¹¹When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard of what the Philistines had done to Saul, ¹²all their valiant men journeyed through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. ¹³Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days.

David Hears of Saul's Death

1 After the death of Saul, David returned from defeating the Amalekites and stayed in Ziklag two days. **2** On the third day a man arrived from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and with dust on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground to pay him honor.

3 "Where have you come from?" David asked him.

He answered, "I have escaped from the Israelite camp."

4 "What happened?" David asked. "Tell me."

He said, "The men fled from the battle. Many of them fell and died. And Saul and his son Jonathan are dead."

5 Then David said to the young man who brought him the report, "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?"

6 "I happened to be on Mount Gilboa," the young man said, "and there was Saul, leaning on his spear, with the chariots and riders almost upon him. **7** When he turned around and saw me, he called out to me, and I said, 'What can I do?'"

8 "He asked me, 'Who are you?'"

" 'An Amalekite,' I answered.

9 "Then he said to me, 'Stand over me and kill me! I am in the throes of death, but I'm still alive.'"

10 "So I stood over him and killed him, because I knew that after he had fallen he could not survive. And I took the crown that was on his head and the band on his arm and have brought them here to my lord."

11 Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. **12** They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

13 David said to the young man who brought him the report, "Where are you from?"

"I am the son of an alien, an Amalekite," he answered.

14 David asked him, "Why were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the LORD's anointed?"

15 Then David called one of his men and said, "Go, strike him down!" So he struck him down, and he died. **16** For David had said to him, "Your blood be on your own head. Your own mouth testified against you when you said, 'I killed the LORD's anointed.' "

David's Lament for Saul and Jonathan

17 David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan, **18** and ordered that the men of Judah be taught this lament of the bow (it is written in the Book of Jashar):

19 "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights.
How the mighty have fallen!"

20 "Tell it not in Gath,
proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,
lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad,
lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice.

21 "O mountains of Gilboa,
may you have neither dew nor rain,
nor fields that yield offerings of grain.

- For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil.
- 22 From the blood of the slain,
from the flesh of the mighty,
the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied.
- 23 “Saul and Jonathan—
in life they were loved and gracious,
and in death they were not parted.
They were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions.
- 24 “O daughters of Israel,
weep for Saul,
who clothed you in scarlet and finery,
who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.
- 25 “How the mighty have fallen in battle!
Jonathan lies slain on your heights.
- 26 I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women.
- 27 “How the mighty have fallen!
The weapons of war have perished!”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

Saul's tragic life and death can teach us many practical lessons: (1) great sins often begin as “little matters”—impatience, incomplete obedience, excuse-making; (2) once sin gets hold of people, they go from bad to worse; (3) if we are not right with God, we will not get along with God's people; (4) excuses are no substitute for confessions; (5) natural gifts and abilities mean nothing without the power of God; and (6) there is no substitute for obedience.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (1 Sa 31-2 Sam 1). Victor Books.

III. Life and Death (31)

While David was sending gifts to his friends, Saul and his family were being stripped on the battlefield! "To be carnally minded is death" (Rom. 8:6). Gilboa had been the scene of some great victories in the days of Deborah (Jud. 4–5) and Gideon (Jud. 7); but this day it would be the scene of a tragic defeat. God had abandoned Saul, and the only thing left for the rebellious king was death. How sad that his innocent son, Jonathan, had to suffer because of the father's sins.

Read 2 Sam. 1:1–10 for another account of the death of Saul. It is not difficult to harmonize the two accounts. Saul saw that he was defeated; he did not want to fall into the hands of the enemy alive, because they would only humiliate him. Therefore, he tried to take his own life by falling on his sword. This, however, did not kill him; and he was yet alive, leaning upon his spear (2 Sam. 1:6), when the Amalekite came along and finished the work. (However, it must be noted that there are those who believe the Amalekite in 2 Sam. 1 was not telling the truth, but only giving this story to David to explain why he possessed Saul's royal crown and bracelet. Perhaps he thought that David would reward him because he "did Saul a favor" by killing him.) There is an important lesson in Saul's death: because Saul refused to slay all of the Amalekites (15), one of them ended up killing him. The sin that we fail to deal with, eventually causes our downfall. Saul lost his crown: "Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have that no one take your crown" (Rev. 3:11).

How the enemy rejoiced at the death of Saul. What triumph it brought to the temples of their false gods. Saul did not glorify his God either in life or death (Phil. 1:20–21). It was commendable that the heroic men of Jabesh-Gilead rescued the desecrated bodies of the royal family and gave them decent burial. They burned them, probably to prevent any future insults. Saul had once rescued these people (chap. 11), and this was one way they could repay him. David later put the bones in a tomb (2 Sam. 21:12–14). When he became king at Hebron, David showed his appreciation to these brave men for honoring their late king (2 Sam. 2:5–7).

Saul's tragic life and death can teach us many practical lessons: (1) great sins often begin as "little matters"—impatience, incomplete obedience, excuse-making; (2) once sin gets hold of people, they go from bad to worse; (3) if we are not right with God, we will not get along with God's people; (4) excuses are no substitute for confessions; (5) natural gifts and abilities mean nothing without the power of God; and (6) there is no substitute for obedience.

2 SAMUEL 1–5

These chapters describe the events leading up to David's coronation as king of Israel. You will want to read 1 Chron. 10:1–14, 11:1–19, and 14:1–8 for parallel accounts.

I. David Sorrows over Saul's Death (1)

A lesser saint would have rejoiced that his enemy was slain, but David was a man after God's own heart and felt keenly the tragedy of Saul's sin. Of course, David's dear friend Jonathan was also dead; the sin of a disobedient father had brought judgment upon innocent people. We have

already noted the lessons of Saul's death in our study of 1 Samuel, but it would be profitable to consider some of the other details.

Note that an Amalekite brought the news and claimed to be the one who finally took Saul's life. Had Saul obeyed the Lord in 1 Sam. 15 and slain *all* of the Amalekites, this would not have happened. The sin we fail to slay is the one that slays us. See Deut. 25:17–19.

David's lamentation is touching; see Prov. 24:17. This "Song of the Bow" connects with Jonathan's use of the bow (1 Sam. 20:20ff). There are no unkind words about Saul in this song. David's chief concern is that the Lord's anointed has been slain and the Lord's glory has been dimmed. He is anxious that the unsaved enemy not rejoice over this victory. "How are the mighty fallen!" is his theme (vv. 19, 25, 27). In 1 Sam. 10:23, Saul "stood higher" than any other man, but now he had fallen lower than the enemy!

Merrill, E. H. (1985). 1 Samuel. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 1, pp. 455-458) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

4. THE BATTLE OF GILBOA (CHAP. 31)

31:1–6. Just as Samuel had prophesied (28:19), **the Philistines** quickly and easily defeated **Israel** in the broad plains of the Valley of Jezreel where they, with their chariots (2 Sam. 1:6), had an overwhelming tactical advantage (cf. Josh. 17:16; Jud. 4:3, 13, for the use of iron chariots by the Canaanites in this same area). **Saul**, with **three of his four sons**—all but Ish-Bosheth (see 2 Sam. 2:8)—**fled** from **Mount Gilboa**. **Saul** was overtaken, however, and mortally **wounded** after **his sons** had been slain. Fearing that he might be found by the Philistines and tortured to death (1 Sam. 31:4), he asked **his armor-bearer** to kill him, an order his attendant refused to obey. **Saul** then, in violation of an Israelite taboo, committed suicide (v. 5), an act rarely known among Israelites in the Old Testament (cf. Abimelech [Jud. 9:54], Samson [Jud. 16:30], Ahithophel [2 Sam. 17:23], and Zimri [1 Kings 16:18]). His death by his own hand climaxed a life which had been led in independence of God.

31:7–10. **When the Israelites** learned that their king was dead, **they abandoned their cities** and took to the wilderness. **The Philistines** eventually came on the bodies of **Saul and his three sons**, decapitated the king, displayed **his armor in the temple** of the goddess Ashtoreth (cf. comments on 7:3–4), and impaled **his body** on the city **wall of Beth Shan**, a prominent town on the eastern slopes of Mount Gilboa overlooking the Jordan Valley.

31:11–13. So horrified were **the people of Jabesh Gilead** when they became aware of this desecration that they removed **the bodies of Saul and his sons** under cover of **night** and brought **them** to their own city, just 10 miles across the Jordan. Probably to hide their mutilation **they burned** the corpses and **buried** the **bones**. This last act of respect was a tribute of a grateful people to the fact that Saul's first public deed was the rescue of this same city from the Ammonites 40 years before (11:1–11). And one cannot forget that Saul's own tribe, Benjamin, found much of its more recent historical origins in Jabesh Gilead (Jud. 21:8–12). For whatever reasons, the courageous actions of the people of Jabesh Gilead would not be forgotten by David when he at last came to power (2 Sam. 2:4–7). Later David had Saul's and Jonathan's bones exhumed and reburied in Benjamin (2 Sam. 21:11–14).

A. Lament for Saul and Jonathan (chap. 1)

1:1–10. Shortly after **David returned to Ziklag** (cf. 1 Sam. 27:6) from his successful punitive raid against **the Amalekites** (2 Sam. 1:1), he was met by a runner who had returned from Gilboa with the news of **the death of Saul** and his sons (vv. 2–4). When pressed for details, the messenger claimed that he had come on the wounded **Saul** (vv. 5–6), identified himself as **an Amalekite** (vv. 7–8), and when urged to do so by the king had mercifully put him to death (vv. 9–10). This man’s report, differing from the account in 1 Samuel 31:3–6, was fabricated. Perhaps he called himself an Amalekite to protect Saul from the charge that he asked a fellow Israelite to do the unthinkable—to kill his own king, the Lord’s anointed (cf. 2 Sam. 1:14, 16).

1:11–16. So enraged was **David**, after his grief was somewhat assuaged at the end of the day (vv. 11–12), that he commanded the alleged **Amalekite** to be executed (vv. 13–15). His false testimony, far from ingratiating him with David, had sealed his doom. It is ironic that Saul lost his kingdom because he failed to annihilate the Amalekites, and now one who said he was an Amalekite died because he claimed to have destroyed Saul.

1:17–27. David’s public expression of grief over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan has been preserved in a poem, “The Song of **the Bow**” (vv. 19–27). This in turn is part of a now-lost longer composition referred to by the historian as **the Book of Jashar** (cf. Josh. 10:13). The same epic contained the short quatrain sung by Joshua on the occasion of the defeat of the Amorite league (Josh. 10:12–13).

In David’s song, which opens and closes with the refrain, **How the mighty have fallen!** (2 Sam. 1:19, 27; cf. 1:25) **David** warned against telling of the tragedy in Philistia lest the Philistine maidens **rejoice** (v. 20) just as the Israelite maidens had sung of the triumphs of Saul and David years before (1 Sam. 18:7). David then cursed the **mountains of Gilboa** for having been the stage of **Saul** and Jonathan’s heroic but fruitless defense against the enemy (2 Sam. 1:21–22). The undying loyalty of **Jonathan** comes in for special praise as David viewed father and son knit together **in life ... and in death** (v. 23). Even though **Saul** had oppressed the people at times, he had also, David said, brought them luxury and bounty (v. 24). But it was **Jonathan** whom David celebrated with special pathos. All the years of their unbroken friendship are captured in his stirring tribute, **Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.**

Mathews, K. A. (1998). *The Historical Books*. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (pp. 119–122). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Saul’s Shameful End (31:1–13). The final chapter resumes the account of the Philistine war (1 Sam. 28–29). The Israelites were defeated and many killed on Mount Gilboa. The proud king died shamefully by ending his own life. His corpse was publicly abused by the Philistines. Three of Saul’s sons were also killed in battle, preparing the way for David to be king.

The people of Jabesh Gilead remembered how Saul had delivered them from the Ammonites (see 11:1–11). They journeyed all night to Beth Shan, where Saul’s body had been impaled. They stole the body away and honorably buried Saul at Jabesh, where they mourned his death.

Theological and Ethical Significance. God desires people “after his own heart” (13:14). Such people mirror God’s love and faithfulness. God rejected Eli’s sons as worship leaders because of their wickedness. In their place God raised up “a faithful priest” who would do what was in God’s heart and mind (2:35). God rejected Saul as king because of his disobedience. God looked at David’s heart and chose him to lead God’s people (16:7).

God is free to choose leaders for His people (see Deut. 17:15). Samuel was not a Levite, but God chose him to minister as a priest (1 Sam. 1:1). Saul was from the least significant family of “the smallest tribe in Israel,” but God chose him to deliver His people (9:16, 21). David was the youngest in his family, but God chose him as king (16:11–12).

Christians are to respect those whom God has chosen to lead His people. David showed respect for Saul because he was the Lord’s anointed. Christians should also remember that God is the true Leader of His people. No Christian leader can take God’s place. God dealt harshly with Eli’s sons, who had no respect for God’s sacrifices and abused the laypeople who looked to them for religious leadership. God dealt harshly with Saul, who disregarded God’s command given through the prophet Samuel. No Christian leader is above God’s word.

GOD ESTABLISHES David (1:1–10:19)

This section of the book traces the triumphs of David’s reign, first over the tribe of Judah and then over all Israel. The high point of David’s career was the covenant the Lord made with David and his descendants. Because of God’s blessing, David successfully expanded his kingdom by defeating Israel’s enemies.

David’s Lament (1:1–27). God gave the throne to David; David did not steal the kingdom from Saul. David proved this by dealing swiftly with Saul’s alleged killer and publicly lamenting his personal loss of Saul and Jonathan.

An Amalekite came to David at Ziklag and related how he had killed Saul on Mount Gilboa. Most likely the Amalekite was fabricating his story in order to receive a reward (see 1 Sam. 31:3–6; 2 Sam. 18:22). The Amalekite was greeted with David’s strongest rebuke. David, who had more cause than anyone to kill the king, had refused to raise his hand against the Lord’s anointed (1 Sam. 24:6; 26:23). But this pagan slave did not respect the Lord’s anointed. David’s men executed the Amalekite for his alleged deed.

David lamented the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. His sorrowful refrain “How the mighty have fallen!” expressed tribute to these great men whom David loved and missed.

Tatum, S. L. (1972). 2 Samuel. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher’s Bible Commentary (pp. 179-180). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

Israel Defeated at Gilboa (1 Sam. 31:1–13)

The passage—The dread battle for which Saul had been preparing finally came to pass in the plain of Jezreel at the foot of Mount Gilboa. True to the predictions of the shade of Samuel (28:19), the day was a complete disaster. The Philistines scattered Saul’s army, killed his three sons, and gravely wounded the troubled king himself. Finally, fearing that the Philistines would find him alive and make sport of him, Saul begged his armor bearer to take his life. When the young man refused, Saul fell upon his own sword. Israel was once again without a leader or a viable government to unite and protect them.

When the bodies of Saul and his sons were recovered the next day, they were exploited to the fullest by the Philistines. His armor was displayed in various Philistine temples nearby, and his decapitated body was exposed along with the corpses of his sons on the walls of Beth-Shan. A measure of the respect that some Israelites retained for their fallen king is seen in the daring rescue of these bodies by the men of Jabesh-Gilead. Remembering Saul’s rescue of their city at

the beginning of his reign, they risked their lives to give the bodies of the king's house a proper burial.

David's Reaction to the Death of Saul (2 Sam. 1:1–27)

The passage—The Amalekite claims to have killed Saul. It seems obvious that he was lying. David's reaction was one of shock. The news of the death of the king of his nation and of his best friend Jonathan so overwhelmed him that he lost all desire for food.

The tribute of David to Saul and Jonathan reflects the high degree of loyalty in citizenship and in friendship.

Special points—Some may raise the question about the justice of a man having to die for carrying out the judgment God had already pronounced on Saul for his sins. Keep in mind that God is capable of bringing about his will, and human beings are never wise to elect themselves as agents of God's judgment.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (1 Samuel 31, 2 Sam 1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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